

*For Immediate Release* April 18, 2013

Contact: Rob Blumenthal (202) 224-1010 / Eve Goldsher (202) 224-3751

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## CHAIRWOMAN MIKULSKI DEMANDS ADDITIONAL ACTION ON RESOLVING CLAIMS BACKLOG AT THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS HEARING ON THE FY14 BUDGET REQUEST

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Barbara A. Mikulski (D-Md.), Chairwoman of the full Senate Appropriations Committee, today demanded additional action on resolving the significant backlog of claim processing during a Military Construction-Veterans Affairs Subcommittee hearing on the Department of Veterans Affairs Fiscal Year 2014 budget request. The following are Chairwoman Mikulski's remarks, as prepared for delivery:

"Thank you, Senator Johnson. You are a tireless advocate for our veterans. Thank you, Secretary Shinseki. You are a decorated war hero, and dedicated to our veterans. After ten years of fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, our veterans are coming home. They've already fought on the front lines. They shouldn't have to fight their own government for the benefits they earned. The best thing we can do for our veterans is to provide them with the benefits and services they deserve.

"To provide these benefits and services costs money. That is why I support the President's budget request level of \$1.058 trillion for discretionary programs. This is the same as the deal we made three months ago in the American Taxpayer Relief Act, which passed the Senate 89 to 8. A deal should be a deal.

"In contrast, the Ryan budget and sequester level would be \$966 billion. This is \$92 billion less than the President's request. We need a balanced approach to end sequester, that includes both revenues and targeted cuts, so we can give our veterans the benefits and services they earned and deserve.

"The VA backlog for processing disability claims is well known and well documented. Nationwide, there are 903,000 pending claims in the VA, and 587,352 of these are more than 125 days old. The average wait time to have a claim completed is 273 days, or more than nine months.

"The problems are even worse at the Baltimore Regional Office. The average wait time is 332 days, or 11 months. In Baltimore, 84 percent or 16,767 pending claims are older than 125 days. The Baltimore office also makes more errors. Their error rate is 26.2 percent, compared to 13.7 percent nationally. I have constituents who have waited years for a decision on their benefits. The red tape is causing veterans and their families to suffer. They need a VA that is as fit for duty as the veterans it serves.

"Secretary Shinseki, I ask that additional temporary claims processors be sent to Baltimore. In the first three months of this year, 38 temporary processors were sent, but Baltimore needs more and for a longer period.

"Veterans have been sounding the alarm for years about the backlog. The dedicated employees of the VA have been trying their best to keep up with increasing caseloads and more complex claims. Our wounded warriors can't wait years for improvement. They need action now.

"This hearing isn't about checking the box. It's about taking strong action and holding the VA's feet to the fire when it comes to the services it provides our veterans. You can be sure that I will engage in relentless follow-up to eliminate this backlog once and for all."

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